

## Special Issue: New Speakers of Minority Languages: The Challenging Opportunity

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## Open Access

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**New speakers of minority languages:  
the challenging opportunity – Foreword**

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**1 Introduction**

In this special issue we examine and reflect upon the emergence of “new speakers” in the context of some of Europe’s minority languages. The “new speaker” label is used here to describe individuals with little or no home or community exposure to a minority language but who instead acquire it through immersion or bilingual educational programs, revitalization projects or as adult language learners. The emergence of this profile of speaker draws our attention to the ways in which minority linguistic communities are changing because of globalization and the new profiles of speakers that this new social order is creating. The concept also focuses our attention on some of the fundamental principles which had for a long time been taken for granted in much sociolinguistic research and in particular, language planning associated with linguistic revitalization (O'Rourke and Pujolar 2013). The authors of the eight articles included in this issue engage with these issues through their analyses of new speaker communities across a variety of European contexts including the Basque Country, Brittany, Catalonia, Corsica, Galicia, Ireland, the Isle of Man and Occitania.

The “new speaker” as a category is not of course specific to minority language contexts per se. Millions of people throughout history have learned and used language varieties other than their “mother tongue”, “native”, “first” or “family” language. In the field of linguistics and its related strands, the “new speaker” category is one which has been examined under the perhaps more familiar, but now increasingly contested labels such as “non-native”, “second-language”, “L2” speaker, “learner” etc. Similar to related notions such as “emergent bilinguals” (García and Kleifgen 2010), “multilingual subjects” (Kramsch

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2012), “metrolingualism” (Pennycook 2010), “translanguaging” (Creese and Blackledge 2010) and “translingual practice” (Canagarajah 2013), the term “new speaker” and “new speakerness” constitute an explicit attempt to move away from these older labels. They therefore build on the now growing emphasis in multilingual research to understand the new communicative order of the modern era which is characterized by new types of speakers, new forms of language and new modes of communication. In our view, the “new speaker” phenomenon contradicts the ways in which both majorities and minorities have historically used language to legitimize claims to nationhood and cultural authenticity. Our use of the “new speaker” label also reflects growing critiques in multilingual research of the fundamental epistemologies on which our understanding of language has been based. It prompts us to query how linguistics as a discipline has participated in the reproduction of linguistic ideologies, essentially through abstract notions of “nativeness”, notions which as we will discuss below, have in fact been shown to have little or no empirical basis. In minority language research, studies on language revitalization have followed a similar trend, and have generally focused on native and/or heritage communities, with significantly less attention paid to new speaker profiles and practices (O'Rourke and Pujolar 2013). While there are exceptions to this, there have nonetheless been few if any attempts to explain the entire range of variation across new speaker profiles through comparative theory building and research. This is despite the fact that in many minority language contexts, new speakers have come to constitute an important sociolinguistic group, in some cases outnumbering or replacing traditional native speaker communities altogether.

In the current issue we focus specifically on Europe's minority language contexts. We do of course recognize that the “new speaker” phenomenon extends beyond these specific cases and the issues we explore also resonate with indigenous minority languages in many other parts of the world. There are, for example, clear parallels between “new speakers” and “heritage speakers” who have a long trajectory in minority language contexts where English is hegemonic, especially amongst North-American or Australian “first nations”. The idea of being a new speaker could therefore be used to describe members of those speech communities who “relearned” the language after language shift has taken place, taking the form of adults learning the language through formal training, from their elders and/or recalling it from childhood (see, for example, McCarty 2013). Therefore, our European focus in this special issue, is as much circumstantial as it is ascribed and reflects the contexts in which the “new speaker” phenomenon has become a more central focus in our individual research agendas. In this introduction we will contextualize the broader debates which have prompted some of this research and the types of questions that it has raised. We will also address

issues around defining the notion of new speaker and in doing so build on critiques of the “native speaker” concept. In this special issue we propose a frame for a scholarly conversation which has in fact been going on for some time in other domains but which has been given less explicit attention in the context of minority language research. Through this conversation we hope to contribute to the wider theoretical and epistemological implications of the “new speaker” phenomenon for sociolinguistics and the study of multilingualism more broadly.

## 2 Historicizing new speakers

### 2.1 New speakers as “emic” categories

A cursory review of the literature on studies about language revitalization points to the predominant focus on native and/or heritage communities. Nonetheless, we do find studies which have paid some attention to so-called “non-native” speakers (see, for example, Trosset 1986; Woolard 1989; MacCalium 2007; McEwan-Fujita 2010; O’Rourke 2011). Such studies have tended to examine issues around legitimacy and linguistic authority and the subsequent struggles in which these individuals engage in pursuit of recognition as “real” or “authentic” speakers. These are also issues, which as we will see, are given considerable attention by many of the contributors in the current issue.

Although its use in the English-language literature is more recent,<sup>1</sup> within individual minority language contexts themselves, the idea of “newness” had already existed and has to varying degrees been used as both academic and folk concepts to frame the general profile of speaker we are describing here. Since the early 1980s, the term *euskaldunberri*, (literally, ‘new Basque speaker’) has for instance been widely used in the Basque Country to refer to speakers who learn Basque through formal instruction, including adult education and immersion schooling in *Ikastolas* (see Ortega et al., this issue; Urla 1993, 2012). The differing social backgrounds and linguistic practices of “new” and “old” speakers of Basque made language a contested territory and brought issues of linguistic legitimacy and ownership to the fore. The inclusion of *euskaldunberri* as a dictionary entry<sup>2</sup> confirms the extent to which the term has in fact become naturalized into

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1 Robert (2009) uses the term “New Speaker” to describe second-language speakers of Welsh who are produced through Welsh-medium education.

2 According to the *Elhuyar Hiztegia*, the Basque-Spanish bilingual dictionary, the expression *euskaldunberri* is taken to mean “*vascoparlante cuya lengua materna no es el euskera (que lo ha aprendido siendo adulto)*” [Basque speaker whose mother tongue is not Basque (who has learnt it as adult)] ([http://www.euskara.euskadi.net/r59-15172x/eu/hizt\\_el/index.asp](http://www.euskara.euskadi.net/r59-15172x/eu/hizt_el/index.asp)).

everyday language and used to describe this specific profile of speaker (see also Gatti 2007). In the same vein, in the near-neighboring region of Galicia, the term *neofalante* ‘neo or new speaker’ has come to be used to describe a similar type of speaker, that is, someone who was not brought up speaking the minority language but who adopted Galician language practices as adolescents or as young adults (see O'Rourke and Ramallo, this issue, 2011, 2013). The “neo” prefix is also adopted as part of a label in other contexts including Breton. *Neo-brétonnant* is used for example to describe Breton speakers who acquire the language through schooling or in adulthood (see Hornsby, this issue, 2008; Timm 2010). To varying degrees, across these three minority language contexts such overlapping labels have come to be used as analytical categories. At the same time, they have also been adopted as self-defining categorizations by new speakers themselves and in some cases as derogatory labels used by other social actors to contest the legitimacy of new speakers as “real” speakers.

In other minority language contexts, however, including many of those explored in this issue, there is an absence of such explicit labeling. Nevertheless, issues around legitimacy and authority are by no means less relevant and have been touched on, and in some cases even explored empirically. In the Catalan context, for instance, although no such label exists, issues around “new speaker-ness” have to varying degrees figured in Catalan sociolinguistics (see for instance Pujolar 2007; Woolard 1989, 2011; Woolard and Frekko 2013). Woolard (1989, 2011) in fact even hints at the “new speaker” label, through the coining of the term “New Catalans” to describe second-language speakers of Catalan who adopt bilingual practices. Interestingly, in the case of Irish, where new speaker profiles have for a long time surpassed the number of traditional native speakers (McCloskey 2001), explicit labels are also noticeably absent. Nevertheless, we find other kinds of labelling which is used as a means of distinguishing and, at times denigrating new profiles of speakers as in some way less authentic. The seemingly neutral term *Gaeilgeoir* (literally, ‘Irish speaker’) is for example rarely if ever used to describe a native Irish speaker but can sometimes be used as a derogatory label for new speaker profiles (see Kabel 2000; O'Rourke 2011).

## 2.2 The political economy of new speakers

The new speaker concept and interest in issues around “new speakerness” have emerged in contexts in which there has been a tradition of cultural and political intervention in maintaining and reviving so-called “regional linguistic minorities”. An understanding of the “new speaker” concept therefore requires a historicization of the socio-political and economic conditions within which such a

group of speakers has emerged. While their current sociolinguistic contexts point to several differences, the minority language contexts discussed in this issue followed largely similar historical trajectories. During the modern period, speakers of these languages became subsumed under the apparatus of a linguistically unified nation-state and, as such were relegated to the socioeconomic and socio-political margins. At best they came to be categorized as speakers of “regional” languages and at worst as users of sub-standard “dialects” of the newly acclaimed national language. As regional languages, they were excluded from the modernizing influences of capitalism and liberalism and, as such provided little incentive for newcomers to want to learn these languages or for existing speakers to maintain them. Regional languages and their speakers became peripheral, subordinated and often completely invisible in public spaces. At times this invisibility was the result of explicit laws or political repression. At other times, they were unspoken and a “no policy” policy (Fishman 2001: 454) maintained a *status quo* in which these languages and their speakers remained subordinated. As access to education became more widespread, the explicit exclusion of these languages from national education systems institutionalized the stigmatization of their speakers. The use of these languages gradually retreated to a shrinking rural hinterland which up to then had been “sheltered” from modernizing influences through their geographical and economic isolation. In time, these remaining communities of speakers also began to dwindle through out-migration to the expanding industrial cities or through emigration abroad in search of a better life. Learning the dominant language (and as such becoming “new speakers” of that language) was key to availing of these new opportunities and, in the process, speakers often decided to abandon their own language altogether.

The emergence of language revival moments over the course of the 19th century can be seen as a reaction to nation-state nationalisms and the processes of language shift which such nationalisms had initiated. Language revitalization projects, as Urla (2012) has aptly observed in the case of Basque, were generally characterized by the coming together of social movements and modern governmentalities (Foucault 1991). Language was thus posited as an object of study and sociolinguistic change began to be planned and managed by particular social and/or political groups, institutions and governmental agencies. These language revival movements generally drew upon dominant European ideologies about language and identity, based on the premise that communities of speakers were conventionally constructed as the constitutive bases of distinct nationalities. In the latter part of the 20th century, set against a backdrop of civil rights movements and a push for linguistic diversity at supra-state level through the institutions of the European Union, Western European nation states gradually began to develop a more amiable approach to regional minority languages. In this new

context, these languages have been given greater recognition and to varying degrees provisions have been put in place to promote their use and acquisition, though institutional support in education and at other societal levels. In most cases, new speakers are the outcome of these processes, having learned the language through adult or immersion education programs.

### 3 The native speaker in linguistics and sociolinguistics

Having historicized the political and economic conditions under which “new speakers” emerged, we are then faced with the rather thorny issue of how to define the concept itself. Predictably, debates about what such a definition should look like have emerged at the various academic fora at which the “new speaker” concept has been aired. On such occasions, instinctively, the tendency has been to try to construct categorical boundaries and to delimit who should and should not be included in such a definition. These more positivist analytical leanings, unwittingly perhaps, positioned us as linguistic arbiters, a role which we ourselves had explicitly set out to question. So, rather than aiming at a neatly formulated definition, there was a growing consensus that the “new speaker” concept needed to be framed as a social category which would be subject to social negotiation and variation, and delineated largely by “new speakers” themselves.

#### 3.1 The native speaker in linguistics

Definitional issues are, as we are too well aware, not specific to the “new speaker” concept *per se*. The “native speaker” concept is equally ethereal. Similar to other linguistic concepts, including “sentence”, “noun”, “meaning” etc., defining who or what a native speaker is has remained largely inconclusive. Paikeday’s (1985) examination of the native speaker concept, based on responses to questionnaires and interviews with prominent linguists, confirms the general lack of consensus in defining the term, or even in the perception that such a definition was actually necessary. This is despite the fact that the term was used to underpin generative linguistics as expressed by Chomsky:

One way to test the adequacy of a grammar proposed for L is to determine whether or not the sequences that it generates are actually grammatical, i.e., acceptable to a native speaker, etc. [sic] (Chomsky 2002: 13)

Despite the absence of any explicit definition of the concept, the native speaker has nonetheless been presented as a model of “correct” language use and the user of “well-formed” sentences. Up until the advent of linguistic corpora, native speaker practices were rarely subject to empirical analysis and so for a long time, the authority of the native speaker had remained unquestioned. For structural and generative linguistics in particular, the native speaker concept has thus served as an abstract elicitor of the “appropriate linguistic expressions” that were in truth produced through linguists’ “intuitions” (Paikeday 1985). Thus, the concept of the “native speaker” has been as fuzzy and undefined as other fundamental concepts in linguistics and, as we shall see below, quite consequential in many areas of language planning, teaching and learning.

We would argue that the consequential fuzziness of the “native speaker” concept reveals the multiple ways in which linguistics as a discipline has drawn, albeit implicitly, on the ideals of 19th century linguistic ethnonationalism. The history of the native speaker can be traced to anthropologically romantic notions which link nativeness to a particular community, within a particular territory, associated with an historic and an authentic past. The idea of authenticity therefore gains its force from essentialism, which is based on the assumption that someone can only be considered a “real” speaker by virtue of biology and/or culture (Bucholtz 2003). The concept and ideal of the native speaker is therefore one which the field has inherited and is deeply engrained in the way we have come to think about language more generally (Bonfiglio 2010). Modern discourses about language, culture and nation draw on Herder and later Humboldt’s ideas about the origin of language (Herder 1772; Humboldt 1836). While there was the basic notion that a specific worldview was constructed through a particular language, the work of Herder and Humboldt provided a more succinct response to Lockean skepticism. The Herderian/Humboldtian system produced a synthesis of modernity and antiquarianism that legitimized newly emerging nation-states and nationalist movements. It also provided the basis for linguistics as a discipline, something which was epitomized by the works of Jakob Grimm (Bauman and Briggs 2003). Language came to define national collectivities, implying the trans-historical unity of such collectivities. As such, language provided the means through which their cultural potential could be reproduced. This process of cultural reproduction was allegedly performed through the intergenerational transmission of the language from parents to children, thus through the unbroken lineage of family ties, ensuring a continuity with a “primordial” past through the biological transmission of the language. Therefore language came to contain and to epitomize the essence of the nation through its “native” speakers. Dialectology provides a clear example of how linguistic authenticity was connected to a specific conception of the native speaker as territorially based, as rural and tradi-



tional (old), male and (again) through family transmission. Thus, “the native speaker” was as much an abstraction as “the nation”, “the people” or “the language”, concepts that were mobilized to produce national imaginaries rather than to describe social realities.

To understand how and why linguistics could adopt such a blatantly politicized concept at the same time as it was staking claims to constituting an objective science is beyond the scope of our present discussion. Suffice it is to say that modern sociolinguistics, language planning and applied linguistics inherited many of these basic tenets of linguistic thought. It is also worth highlighting that the notion of the native speaker itself has only recently come under scrutiny, scrutiny which only emerged because of the problems it was seen to create for researchers as they tried to operationalize it in empirical research and teaching practice. Applied linguistics has, for example, a long-standing history of debates around issues of nativeness, particularly in relation to the teaching of English as a second or foreign language (Ammon 2000; Davies 2003). In applied linguistics and language teaching, it is often placed at the centre of language curricula as defining the “target competence”. It is also used to construct milestones in the learning processes with their corresponding stages of evaluation at all levels, from classroom-activity feedback to mass-standardized certificates. However, Davies’ (2003) systematic assessment of the concept suggests that native speakers can only be defined through largely extralinguistic means, that is (again) as socially constructed categories (see also Coulmas 1981). “Nativeness” has also come under scrutiny in debates surrounding “new Englishes” (Kachru 1990; Bolton and Kachru 2006; Jenkins 2006), debates which have highlighted the historical underpinnings of the hegemonic model of “proper English”, a model which essentially reproduced a race-based conception of linguistic legitimacy. Phillipson (1992) highlights the political and economic connections between this ideology and the language teaching industry in his critique of the “tenet” of the native speaker as a linguistic model and as the model for the ideal teacher.

### 3.2 The native speaker in sociolinguistics

Interestingly, even in the more anthropological strand of sociolinguistics, the notion of nativeness has not been explicitly problematized. This is despite the fact that issues around nativeness have been the subject of ongoing debate in Anthropology for many years (Dozier 1955). However, within the Ethnography of Communication and Interactional Sociolinguistics, certain issues have been brought to the fore which touch on related concepts. The notion of “speech community” is one such concept and has been amply discussed by Gumperz (1971)

and Hymes (1961, 1974), and is of direct consequence to issues of language-based group categorization and membership. Their attempts to define the notion in terms of the language or variety used, and the norms or rules of linguistic conduct, were always inconclusive (Wardhaugh 2011), as they were unable to reconcile pre-defined criteria with the locally relevant processes of inclusion and exclusion. As Hymes (1961) puts it:

To participate in a speech community is not quite the same as to be a member of it. Here we encounter the limitation of any conception of speech community in terms of knowledge alone, even knowledge of patterns of speaking as well as of grammar, and of course, of any definition in terms of interaction alone. Just the matter of accent may erect a barrier between participation and membership in one case, although being ignored in another. (Hymes 1961: 50–51)

In an attempt to address some of these limitations, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) adapted Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of "community of practice" to provide space for more emic, locally-based and ethnographically circumscribed language communities. Neither option is, however, relevant to all of the cases we address in this issue and it is not our intention here to argue that new speakers form distinct communities, be it at a local or translocal level. The question we seek to ask, however, is how and to what extent new speakers may see themselves and/or be seen by others as legitimate participants in the speech communities that have been historically constituted and imagined in contexts of language revitalization. Doerr's (2009) recent collection of essays devoted to the critical ethnographic study of "native speaker effects" begins to provide some answers to this question. In her (2009) issue she explored the manifold ways in which the term "native speaker" is mobilized as a "folk concept" and explored the consequences of such mobilization across different contexts, including language education as well as "minority" communities such as Catalonia (Frekko 2009), Ikageng in South Africa (Baker 2009), Yukatek Maya speakers (Whiteside 2009) and Easter Island (Makihara 2009).

### 3.3 New speakers in sociolinguistics

This then provides the general socio-political, economic and indeed ideological context in which "new speakers" of Europe's minority languages have recently emerged. This is also the context in which sociolinguistics as a discipline has participated in the design of language planning paradigms, including its modes of assessment and measurement of language practices and categories of speakers. It is perhaps no coincidence that the "counting" of languages and sociolinguistic

surveys became an important endeavor for both regional, national and international bodies concerned with linguistic revitalization, feeding into emerging discourses of language endangerment (Duchêne and Heller 2007; Urla 1993). Revitalization agendas have followed a similar pattern, where what constitutes revival is often based on somewhat restrictive interpretations of bringing a language back to life with its form unchanged (Jaffe 2011). The linguistic terminology often used to describe the new forms of language which appear in post-revitalization contexts, is testament to this mindset whereby “new speakers” are often delegitimized and represented through *clinical* categorizations. There are no shortage of these categorizations which include notions such as “semi-speaker”, “terminal speaker”, “rememberer”, “ghost speaker”, “neo-speaker”, “last speaker”, “L2 speaker”, “narrow and broad speakers”, “non-fluent”, “semilinguals”, “bilinguals”, “imperfect speaker”, “former speaker”, “educated speakers”, “shift-prone speakers” and “once speakers” (Dorian 1981; Fishman 1991; Grinevald and Bert 2011; Haugen 1953; Hill and Hill 1986; Stutnabb-Kangas 1984 [1981]; see also Hornsby, this issue). As Jaffe suggests (this issue), these categories have been constructed as a way of mapping the effect of language shift left on speakers’ performances and competencies. As such they represent a *symptomatology* of language shift which document linguistic *dis*-embodiment through interference, hybridization, grammatical simplification and other forms of tainted, corrupted or otherwise pathologic language practices of more “correct” linguistic models. These include both models of language and models of speakers. The “new speaker” concept therefore introduces a dissonance in this paradigm where “new speaker” models can be seen to represent a *re*-embodiment of the language through models of language and speakerhood which are not dependent on alignment with existing speaker models, but which give “new speakers” recognition as linguistic models in and of themselves. García and Kleifgen (2010) coining of “emergent bilinguals” produces a somewhat similar effect. In relabeling “learners” who are not yet proficient in the language they are acquiring, they move away from the more clinical labels which have tended to be used to describe such groups.

The authors of this issue can generally be placed within a tradition that began as “peripheral sociolinguistics” of Europe (Martin-Jones 1989). This is a strand of sociolinguistics which critiqued and adapted American sociolinguistics in the 1960s, eminently through the works of Lafont (1968, 1979), Gardy and Lafont (1981), Ninyoles (1969), Aracil (1965, 1982), Williams (1992) and others. Although these “founding fathers” were strongly critical of Fishman’s (1967) “diglossia” model, European peripheral sociolinguistics has traditionally operated within what we might call a “language revitalization paradigm” which generally accepted the Fishmanian approach to “Reversing language shift” (1991). This paradigm drew on the principles of positivist sociology and social psychology (Williams

1992) together with hegemonic notions of languages as separate codes and as defining group belonging. In contexts as divergent as Catalonia and the Isle of Man, historically, *sociolinguists for language revival* have been involved in assessing and promoting language planning efforts devoted to the protection and expansion of communities of minority language speakers. “Native speakers” have generally been at the core of such efforts. Fishman (1991) defines his blueprint for linguistic revival basically as a process of reconstruction of the community of native speakers.

We would therefore argue that the emergence of new speakers as a salient social and demographic reality prompts us to query the fundamental assumptions on which much research and planning on European linguistic minorities has been based. The predominantly functionalist perspective inherent in this and other approaches used to explain the process of language shift, have, as Williams (1992) suggests, ignored power relations and conflict in language contact situations. These models have been unable to adequately explain the apparent deviations from the sociolinguistic *status quo* displayed by the emergence of “new speakers” (see O’Rourke and Ramallo, this issue). Neither could such approaches account for the fuzzier in-between spaces of linguistic practice characterized by the more hybridized and often multiple identities (see Martin-Jones et al. 2012; Blommaert 2010; Pennycook 1994, 2007) which as this issue will show, are encapsulated in “new speaker” profiles. The native speaker community has been idealized as speakers of the most “authentic” form of language leading to a preservationist rhetoric (Pennycook 2010: 105) with an exoticizing and romanticizing view of local people locked in time (Cameron 2007). Sociolinguists for language revival in effect draw on “salvage linguistics”, which like salvage anthropology have sought to preserve indigenous cultures and languages and especially to reconstruct an earlier moment in history (Bucholz 2003: 400). However, in doing so revival sociolinguistics suffers from a number of contradictions:

- a) On the one hand, it positions native speakers as legitimate representatives of a given community. On the other hand, there is a realization that non-native speakers are also required to learn and use the language to effectively reverse the processes of language shift.
- b) Sociolinguistics endeavors to keep the language pure and intact while at the same time supports modernization and standardization strategies which often stigmatize the traditional forms of language (and their speakers) on which they based their models of purity in the first place.
- c) At the same time, the ideals of linguistic purity and uniformity also run contrary to new speaker communities which are characterized by diversity and multilingual practices.

Sociolinguistics are thus faced with the widely-recognized epistemological quandary of “how to assert the value of mixed or plural identities in “minority”

societies in which the attempt to escape relations of dominance places a high premium on declarations of absolute difference and clear-cut boundaries” (Jaffe 1993: 101) and following a somewhat similar line of thought, as Bucholtz (2003) points out:

The commitment to study those who have been relegated to the margins of modern structures of power stands as one of the most potent ethical principles of sociolinguistics. But the positing of authenticity as the prerequisite for serious scholarly attention often works to undermine the principle by designating some language users but not others as legitimate representatives of a given community. In addition, a sociolinguistics founded on authenticity must face the problem of essentialism. (Bucholtz 2003: 400)

The contradictions presented to us as researchers in the field are as we will show, also experienced by social actors at different levels. In Ireland, Brittany and Occitania, for instance, an “old” generation of native speakers often challenge the legitimacy of new speakers as members of the community. In Galicia, new speakers themselves feel uncertain about their status and the adequacy of the Galician they speak, despite the fact that “old” speakers usually regard them as linguistic models of correctness (O'Rourke and Ramallo 2013). In all of these contexts, the division between old and new speakers are not just characterized by their language learning trajectories, but by their social profiles, the “old” being generally peasants located in declining rural areas and the “new” being middle-class urban dwellers whose families recently adopted the dominant language. Thus the contradictions are not just “linguistic”, but instead affect the ways in which linguistics was thus far mobilized to characterize legitimate linguistic practices and speaker status, which in turn affect the ways in which sociolinguistics re-affirm the objectives of revitalization agendas and the methods of language planning set out in such agendas.

## 4 New speakers of minority languages: the individual case studies

The authors of the eight articles included in this issue engage with these questions through their analyses of new speaker communities across a variety of minority language contexts including Corsican (Jaffe), Manx (Ó hIfearnáin), Basque (Ortega et. al.), Breton and Yiddish (Hornsby), Galician (O'Rourke and Ramallo), Irish (O'Rourke and Walsh), Occitan (Costa) and Catalan (Pujolar and Puigdevall). However, as will become apparent from a reading of individual articles, the answers to these questions are not always the same. What are classified as “old”

or “native” speakers in one context sometimes show marked differences in other contexts, and the same can be said of “new speakers”. In some of the minority language contexts presented in this issue the new speaker label has come to be used as an analytical category. In others, it has even been adopted as a self-defining category by new speakers themselves. Sometimes the term serves as a derogatory label to contest the legitimacy of new speakers as “real” speakers. In other minority language contexts, while no explicit label exists, issues around legitimacy and authority are no less relevant. Speakers within individual minority language contexts often draw on different sources of legitimacy, which in turn produce contrasting effects on “native” and “new speaker” relations. On the one hand, such relations are affected by the socioeconomic status of each group of speakers and on the other, by the forms of linguistic capital they possess (e.g. how different generations gained access to literacy in each language).

In the first article in this issue, Jaffe explores the diverse trajectories of Corsican language learners. Her discussion points to the complex issues around identity construction amongst such learners as new speakers of Corsican. She examines emerging issues around legitimacy, authority and authenticity in a sociolinguistic context in which both formal/institutional and informal/social use of Corsican is restricted. New speakers of Corsican, as Jaffe shows, are of themselves a very diverse group. This diversity is apparent in their motivations for learning the language, their social backgrounds and political alignments, and their commitment to the process of revitalization more generally. Therefore, learners can only become “new speakers” by producing their own set of new contexts of language use and their own standards of performance. However, as Jaffe also shows, Corsican language teachers become important agents in the creation of these new contexts and the production of a new type of Corsicanness which steers clearly away from the ideals of localism, tradition, nationalism and linguistic purity.

Ó hIfearnáin’s examination of the Manx context provides us with an example of where a native speaker community no longer exists. He traces the way in which in the absence of native speaker models, the more active members of the Manx revitalization movement become the new linguistic role models. These new speakers are awarded authority on the basis of their perceived linguistic expertise and their participatory role in the events and networks that construct a sense of community. Such a “community” may even include people who display little or no actual use of the language as a conventional means of communication. Cases of “extreme language shift” such as the case of Manx, provide evidence that linguistic legitimacy and authenticity do not stem from the seemingly intrinsic properties inherent to the languages or its native speakers, but are instead derived from groups which have the ability to construct and claim legitimacy.

The situation becomes more complex when conventional “native” speakers and “new” speakers constitute, and are perceived as, relatively distinct groups. Where this occurs, tensions often emerge between the two. New speakers can come to endow “native speakers” with a higher claim to linguistic authenticity and ownership by virtue of having acquired the language through family transmission. The articles on Galician (O'Rourke and Ramallo), Basque (Ortega et al.), and Irish (O'Rourke and Walsh) all illustrate this general trend. In the cases of Breton (Hornsby) and Occitan (Costa) these tensions are elevated to antagonistic levels between the two groups.

Ortega et al.'s interviews with new speakers of Basque reveal that such speakers generally accord greater legitimacy and authenticity to native speakers. However, this becomes diluted amongst those new speakers who report more frequent use of Basque, a trend which O'Rourke and Walsh also identify in the Irish context. Costa documents developments in the long-standing feud amongst proponents of Occitan where traditionalist activists have contested the authority of established academic Occitanists and their proposed standard. The largely rural-based traditionalist activists consisting of traditional native speakers, tend to use dialectal forms of Occitan and perceive standard Occitan as “artificial”. Conversely, urban new speakers of Occitan increasingly adhere to what Costa calls a “post-vernacular” culture that reinterprets tradition as a component of contemporary global lifestyles. In the case of Breton, Hornsby shows that the conflict revolves around linguistic purity, with new speakers allegedly presenting evidence of interferences from French that are perceived by native speakers as defeating the purpose of linguistic preservation.

In Galicia, as O'Rourke and Ramallo have shown elsewhere (see O'Rourke and Ramallo 2013), native speakers (mostly rural, Spanish-literate) have a high regard for new speakers (mostly urban, middle-class) who acquired literacy in standard Galician, something that they had not done. In this context, new speakers are positioned and indeed position themselves as political “vanguards” for language revitalization efforts, and as a group purposely and consciously act as agents of social change. In their contribution to this issue, O'Rourke and Ramallo look specifically at how new speakers of Galician construct themselves as agents of social change. In the Galician and other minority language contexts, new speakers often take on an activist role, showing a strong sense of responsibility towards ensuring the future survival of the language, as well as a clear commitment to what they perceive as a situation of social and political injustice. O'Rourke and Ramallo show that through their commitment to the language cause, new speakers of Galician may reflect similar stances to other types of active minorities including environmentalists and feminist movements.



In the final article in this issue, Pujolar and Puigdevall look at the case of Catalan. This is a context which is characterized by relatively fluid boundaries between old and new speakers. This fluidity is probably made possible by the fact that in Catalonia, there is an almost simultaneous acquisition of Catalan and Spanish and, as Pujolar and Puigdevall observe, in everyday interaction the distinction is of little relevance as large numbers of people routinely use the two languages to different degrees. They focus their analysis on the process whereby people develop the ability to speak Catalan in contexts outside the classroom. They put forward the notion of *muda* to describe the specific biographical junctures that mark repertoire changes over the life of an individual speaker. This *muda* usually occurs through the adoption of “the other” language in specific social milieus and with particular people. The authors also point to the varied strategies Spanish speakers develop to be accepted as speakers of Catalan in everyday life.

## 5 Concluding remarks

In this issue, our aim has been to raise awareness about the contradictions brought about by the emergence of new profiles of minority language speakers. We would argue that these contradictions are markedly different from the traditional division which tended to be formed along ethnolinguistic lines, particularly between majority and minority language speakers. New speakers thus create a division within the minority language group itself, a division which unsettles established ideologies around language and identity. Philology, dialectology and sociolinguistics have been intimately involved in the production of a legitimate minority linguistic space and, as such are also caught up in such contradictions. On the one hand, these disciplines have enhanced the prestige of minority languages through support for standardization and normalization, processes from which new speakers are in many ways the outcome. On the other hand, through a predominant focus on native speaker communities, analyses of issues around new speakerness have been at best patchy and at worst absent altogether. Sociolinguists for language revival have sought to preserve indigenous cultures and languages. However, in trying to reconstruct these languages on the past they positioned native speakers as the legitimate representatives of a given speech community. In doing so, new speakers have been largely ignored (intentionally or otherwise) as a linguistic group, despite the fact that such speakers are a necessary part of reversing language shift.

Our linguistic economies are undergoing a process of profound transformation, in which the sources of linguistic authority are being displaced as we move towards a new post-national sociolinguistic order (Pujolar 2007). In this new



sociolinguistic order, new speaker profiles and their corresponding practices can no longer be ignored. It is likely that across different linguistic communities where new speaker practices are emerging, space will need to be explicitly demarcated for them within linguistic revitalization projects. Linguistics and its related strands have played an important role in shaping the processes of language intervention. Our focus on the “new speaker” phenomenon is therefore a way of acknowledging this interventionist role and in our analytical endeavors, to explicitly engage in an exercise of reflexivity.

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